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C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 000340

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA. NSC FOR SHAPIRO/PASCUAL

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SUBJECT: "GOVERNMENT" IN GAZA REPLACES MAYOR AND COUNCIL IN AL-ZAHRA VILLAGE

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. The "Minister" of Local Government (MoLG) in Gaza removed the mayor of al-Zahra and the municipal council in mid-February, installing a committee of individuals associated with Hamas to run the municipality. Deposed Mayor Tarik Hijju, who is a member of Fatah, told PolOff that he tried to retain control of the city offices, but that the MoLG confiscated the keys and took over municipal operations. West Bank Fatah officials said the government in Gaza replaced Hijju to control aid distribution. They said the government in Gaza has replaced Fatah-affiliated officials with its own people in most cities. AID partner CHF has suspended projects in al-Zahra due to the change in leadership. End Summary.

"GOVERNMENT" IN GAZA REPLACES  
MAYOR AND COUNCIL OF AL-ZAHRA

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¶2. (C) The "Minister" of Local Government in the Gaza Strip, Ziad al-Thatha, replaced the mayor and municipal council of al-Zahra, a village north of Nusayrat, and installed a three-person committee of individuals associated with Hamas to run the municipality as of February 18. Kamal Mahmud Mafuz, Abdallah Abu Alainin, and Mu'in Mustafa al-Tirri took control of al-Zahra on February 23, ousting Mayor Tarik Hijju.

¶3. (C) Hijju told PolOff on February 25 that he was informed by a letter from the MoLG that his term as mayor was over and that the "government" was replacing him. He said he initially refused to hand over the keys to the municipal offices, but that the Gaza-based MoLG confiscated them. He said the Ramallah-based PA Ministry of Local Governance expressed its support, but asked him to stay home. Hijju said he was arrested three times by security forces in Gaza in 2008 for Fatah membership, but that he managed to retain control of the municipal offices until this incident.

FATAH OFFICIALS: HAMAS TRYING  
TO CONTROL AID DISTRIBUTION

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¶4. (C) Fatah officials in the West Bank told PolSpec on February 24 that the al-Zahra mayor was likely replaced to prevent international donors and the PA from distributing aid without Hamas oversight. They said Hijju was not willing to cooperate with Hamas-affiliated officials, and that it was only a matter of time before he was replaced. They said that the Gaza-based government has appointed its followers as key staff and deputy mayors in most Gaza municipalities, replacing Fatah-affiliated municipal officials in order to gain greater control.

CHF SUSPENDS OPERATIONS IN AL-ZAHRA

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¶5. (C) Donna Stefano, of CHF International -- an implementing partner for USAID projects -- told USAID on February 24 that CHF suspended all project activities and contact with the al-Zahra Municipality in light of these developments.

WALLES